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ABSTRACT

Economics education in elementary and secondary schools is essential in order to prepare a responsible citizenry that can cope with economic problems and issues. This ERIC Digest examines: (1) the primary goal of economics education; (2) current economics curriculum patterns; and (3) methods of improving the economics curriculum. The basic concepts of economics education should be included in a social studies core curriculum and curriculum patterns should include: (1) the use of separate economics courses; (2) the general infusion of economics principles and concepts into other courses; or (3) the utilization of specific units of economics instruction within existing courses on other subjects. One method of improving economics education is to combine an infusion strategy in grades K-12 with a required one semester high school course. Four characteristics of a sound secondary school economics course include: (1) an emphasis on basic concepts and principles; (2) teaching strategies that elicit active student learning; (3) the connection of concepts and principles to other school subjects and citizenship roles; and (4) the application of knowledge to public issues and problems. The use of quantitative analysis and macro-economics should be emphasized. A 16-item bibliography is appended. (JHP)

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ECONOMICS IN THE CURRICULUM

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by

David Seiter

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Economics in the Curriculum

by David Seiter

Trade deficits, stock market woes, and the energy crisis are examples of economic problems in the United States during the past fifteen years. However, it is unlikely that most citizens understand what created these kinds of problems or how leaders have tried to solve them. This lack of knowledge is a consequence of insufficient emphasis on economics in the general education of citizens. There is no doubt that education in elementary and secondary schools is essential in preparing a responsible citizenry that can understand and cope with economic problems and issues. This ERIC digest examines (1) the main goal of economic education in elementary and secondary schools, (2) current curriculum patterns in economics, and (3) means for improving the economics curriculum.

What Is the Main Goal of Economic Education in Schools? Economic educators tend to agree with Mark C. Shug that "the goal of economic education is to foster in students the thinking skills and substantial economic knowledge necessary to become effective and participating citizens" (1985, 6). Economic literacy is emphasized as a key to effective citizenship in a free society. According to Ronald A. Banaszak, "Economically literate citizens, because they possess an understanding of economic generalizations and concepts, will enjoy a more complete understanding of their world, be able to make reasoned decisions, and be more fully in control of their economic future" (1987, 2).

In his comprehensive review of literature on economic education, Steven L. Miller (1988) highlights the viewpoint that economic literacy is an indispensable facet of general education for citizenship. Furthermore, Miller argues persuasively that the basic concepts of economics should be included in the core curriculum, the common learning experiences required of all students for graduation from high school. To what extent is economics included in the curricula of elementary and secondary schools in the United States? How is it included?

What Are the Curriculum Patterns in Economics? Separate courses in economics and infusion of content into other courses are two means of including economics in the curricula of elementary and secondary schools. Separate courses in economics are usually one-semester in duration and are offered in high school. These courses tend to emphasize micro-economics; content on macro-economics is usually omitted or treated superficially. As of the beginning of 1988, sixteen states mandated that students complete a course in economics as a requirement for graduation from high school.

In contrast to the separate course approach, the infusion process integrates economic concepts into other courses throughout the curriculum, such as history, geography, and government. According to Miller (1988, 18), infusion is the dominant means of including economics in the secondary school curriculum (grades 7-12). Courses most often reported as objects of infusion of economics content are American history, government, civics, and world history. Virtually all teaching of economics in elementary schools is done through infusion, as part of the broader social studies program.

The infusion strategy is exemplified by the Developmental Economic Education Program (DEEP) of the Joint Council on Economic Education. Established in 1965, DEEP has been extended to more that 1375 school districts with some 15 million students. Members draw on sources and materials from 50 state economic councils and 270 centers for education for their courses. Even though there are difficulties in quantifying the value of DEEP, evidence from research done by the Joint Council on Economic Education (JCEE) shows "that students in DEEP districts learn significantly more economics than students from districts that do not participate." (Miller 1988, 22).

One aspect that makes the infusion method enticing to curriculum developers is that most social studies teachers are potential teachers of economics (Brenneke and Soper 1987, 187). For example, it is impossible to teach American history accurately without using economic concepts to explain key themes and events such as the development of industries, the rise of labor unions, and the Great Depression.

The effective infusion of economic concepts requires a coordinated effort to comprehensively implement materials and connect content from one grade level to the next. The essential content must be systematically presented to all students. Teachers who know basic ideas of economics are also essential to successful use of a general infusion strategy.

Another type of infusion approach is using discrete units of economic instruction within existing courses on other subjects instead of the piecemeal instruction that is often encountered with the general infusion approach. This strategy offers a greater possibility of coherent and comprehensive treatment of economics from subject to subject and from grade to grade. However, successful use of this method depends upon units that fit together in a well-planned economics program within the social studies curriculum.

How Can the Economics Curriculum Be Improved? One way to improve education in economics is to combine an infusion strategy in grades K-12 with a required one-semester course in high school. Exposure to a formal secondary school course in economics is the key to higher scores on tests of economic literacy (Miller 1988, 31).

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A sound secondary school course in economics is distinguished by four essential characteristics:

- Emphasis on basic concepts and principles of the discipline.
- Reinforcement of basic concepts and principles through teaching strategies that elicit active learning by students.
- Connection of basic concepts and principles of economics to various subjects in school and to the lives of citizens outside of schools.
- Applications of economic knowledge to decision making about public and private issues and problems of the kind that individuals face as producers, consumers, and citizens.

One area of skills neglected in most economic education curricula is the use of quantitative data (QD). The use of QD in arriving at economic decisions is crucial in any economic education curriculum. Social studies teachers have a long tradition of developing decision-making skills but seldom use QD in helping to reach those decisions. There should be renewed emphasis on including QD in the economic education curriculum to further develop cognitive processes and skills in decision making.

One facet of content that is often overlooked or underemphasized is macro-economics, the study of the functioning of the economy as a whole. This content deficiency deprives students of knowledge and perspectives needed by citizens to comprehend, analyze, and judge certain kinds of economic decisions by the United States government and by international organizations. Thus, the ideas and perspectives of macro-economics should be included in high school education on economics.

It seems that all students, even those of lower intellectual ability, can benefit from a rigorous high school course based on concepts and principles of economics and development of skills in rational decision making about economic issues and problems. Thus, a solid course in economics belongs in the core curriculum, the program of studies required of all students for graduation from high school.

Improvement of economic education in elementary and secondary schools will enhance the economic literacy and citizenship capabilities of all students. They will gain a better understanding of national and world-wide economic events, issues, and problems. And they are likely to become better decision makers in their private lives and in their public participation as citizens of a free society.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a list of resources including references used to prepare this Digest. Those items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304 or call 1-800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE *(Current Index to Journals in Education)* which is available in most libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries using the bibliographic information provided below.

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